

**REMARKS OF
COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS
AT
THE TELECOMMUNICATIONS RELAY SERVICE FORUM
FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
WASHINGTON, DC
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Good morning. And welcome. This is a good occasion and a happy event -- a chance to see old friends and to make some new ones, but also a wonderful opportunity to see first-hand some of the technologies that can transform all of our lives. I want to thank Dane Snowden and his excellent team, everyone in the Disability Rights Office and the new Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau for working so hard, for many months now, to make this day a reality.

The technologies we see today, and those coming down the road in the years just ahead, present I think an unparalleled opportunity for us all. First, of course, to the deaf and hard-of-hearing, to whom some of these products and services can mean the difference between life on the edge and life with a good job as a fully participating individual in what America has to offer. We have not only the opportunity to bring these products and services on line and to make them available – we have the ***obligation*** to do so. It is simply unacceptable that the jobless rate among the deaf and hard-of-hearing is 75%. And I would point out that this rate is unfortunately duplicated among other disabilities communities. That's national treasure being wasted. It's talent that could be used to move this country forward. We cannot let that continue. And now that technology can help us address the problem, we must harness that technology to the important goal of opening wide the doors of economic opportunity for all our citizens.

Let me be clear. As new technologies develop, we have an obligation to do everything we can to realize the vision of Congress that those with disabilities have access to ***functionally equivalent***

services so that *all* citizens can participate fully in our society.

I saw a demonstration of IP Relay and other new technologies at the TDI conference in South Dakota last summer, and I've seen more here yesterday and today, and it is clear that these advanced products and services can go a long way toward enabling people with disabilities to obtain information and to communicate with others in ways that we could only dream about a few years ago.

Congress mandated the creation of TRS in the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and since that time all 50 states, the Territories and the District of Columbia have implemented TRS. Just last month, we issued a Declaratory Ruling that will make Internet Relay available as an option for the millions of Americans with disabilities and those who communicate with these citizens by authorizing the recovery of all IP Relay costs from the Interstate TRS Fund.

My belief is that in this day and age, having access to *advanced* communications and information is every bit as important as access to basic telephone service was not so many years ago. I don't think it exaggerates much to characterize access to telecommunications in this modern age as a civil right. Each and every citizen of this great country should have access to the wonders of modern telecommunications.

We've made some progress, both in the last Commission and now in the new one. As a result, we have:

- New rules to ensure that communications products and services are accessible to those with disabilities, as Congress directed in Section 255.

- An overhaul and update of our Telecommunications Relay Services (TRS) rules to provide for faster, more effective relay services.
- 711 for relay services so that consumers will no longer need to remember different TRS numbers and TRS users will be able to put one number on their business cards, thereby making it easier for people to call them.
- Action on captioning to ensure that everyone has access to televised information, including most importantly warnings about emergency situations.

That's an impressive record. In some of these, we still have not achieved full implementation and we must keep pushing. So our objective in the new Commission is not to rest on past accomplishments; it is to build on them. The question is: how do we accomplish this? Here are some things "to do."

First, we at the Commission must finish the business on ***our*** agenda. The declaratory ruling is just one part of a larger whole. The Commission needs to complete its section 255 proceeding on accessibility to equipment and services and to ensure that we are doing all we can to carry out fully Congress' directives. We must also address other important issues such as hearing aid compatibility for digital wireless phones, accessibility to digital and interactive television, and implementation this year of video description and TTY access to E-911.

Second, further outreach is critical. Outreach means many things. It means informing the deaf and hard-of-hearing about what we at the Commission can do to assist them, whether it's basic information or working to resolve consumer complaints. Outreach is highlighting the challenges and

opportunities you face to Congress, to opinion makers all across America, and to all of our fellow citizens.

Third, we need to make much greater use of public sector-private sector partnering to promote access to the marvels of technology for those with disabilities. This means utilizing the good offices of the Commission to get disabilities groups and leaders together with the designers and manufacturers of new equipment at the drawing board stage or earlier, so that these marvels they are developing will be accessible to you and maximally helpful to you. As we see through the demonstration of all of the wonderful products and services that are part of this Expo, business plays the critical role in innovation and investment to make such things available to us. History has shown that incorporating accessibility at the design stage makes good business sense. And, if this is done right, industry, too, will benefit by making products and services accessible to the broadest range of users. It is, I believe, very much a win-win situation. Section 255, as most of us know, imposes certain requirements on manufacturers and service providers to provide accessibility, but bringing that to fruition demands the closest kind of collaboration among everyone concerned. I spent most of my eight years at the Department of Commerce during the Clinton Administration putting together public sector-private sector partnerships, and I am a true believer in their power and effectiveness. There are just a lot of problems out there that the private sector alone, or the public sector alone, cannot resolve. But by working together, they *can* be resolved. I am convinced that there is significant room for just this kind of cooperative effort in addressing the major challenges I am finding at the FCC. One other thought here regarding how we make these products and services more readily available: in addition to working with manufacturers, we must also work throughout the disabilities communities to encourage their adoption of what may sometimes seem strange -- or even threatening -- new technologies.

Fourth, government in general must get its own house in order through such actions as making sure that those with disabilities are able to access the information they need through the Internet or via other information technologies. Unfortunately, as a recent report suggests, many federal government agency web-sites are still not accessible. We need to fix this now.

I look at all these challenges, and I see a lot of work to be done. But I believe -- I really do -- that we will get it done. Not just because you care, or the Commission cares, or I care. We'll get it done because a lot of other people are beginning to care. And the more they become aware, the more they will care.

One year while I was at the Commerce Department, our Secretary, Bill Daley, asked me to lead the Department-wide Combined Federal Campaign, the CFC, to raise money for the many deserving charities and good causes that depend upon voluntary contributions for their support. The Campaign had a good theme that year: "It all comes back to you." That was the message I tried to share and spread as we solicited contributions. It all comes back to you, I told people, because one day, you may be in need of the services of some of these charities and organizations to cope with an illness, a family crisis, all kinds of other life contingencies. Predictions are now that before too many more years, as life spans increase, maybe half of us lucky enough to live into our seventies and beyond will incur some kind of disability. So it may all come back to us very directly. But it all comes back to you because what we are about here, in trying to bring opportunities to those who need them, is bettering our society, improving our output as a nation, enhancing the quality of life of our neighbors or relatives, improving our communities and elevating our national life. So as we make the rounds here

today, looking at all these good things, let's just remember that we're not here to talk about something nice to do for other folks; we're here to help ourselves and our country by developing the resources God has given us. God bless America.

Thank you all for participating in this event.